Documentary on JFK assassination puts Stone's film to shame

Clay Shaw, left, and Jim Garrison square off in 'He Must Have Something,' a documentary about Shaw's trial on charges he conspired to kill John F. Kennedy. The show airs tonight at 7 on LPB.

TV WATCH

DANNY HEITMAN

Finally, a courageous filmmaker has come forth to challenge the powerful men lying about the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

No, I'm not talking about "JFK" director Oliver Stone, a man who seeks the truth by guessing a lot and crossing his fingers.

Stone, the Hollywood director who has become powerful by sermonizing against power, is currently being celebrated for "JFK," a film that condemns falsehood and then lies for three hours.

If the film industry had an Oscar for hypocrisy, Stone would be the front-runner to take home a trophy. Short of that, Stone should take home a copy of Stephen Tyler's "He Must Have Something," a one-hour documentary airing tonight at 7 on LPB.

Forget about "JFK." Tyler's "He Must Have Something" is the best recent film about the Kennedy assassination — better than "JFK" because it practices everything that Stone merely preaches.

Stone's "JFK" throws a wet, sloppy kiss to Jim Garrison, the former New Orleans district attorney who prosecuted Crescent City businessman Clay Shaw for conspiring to kill Kennedy. When Garrison brought the case against Shaw in 1969, he rhapsodized about the need for honesty and a government where little people could be safe. Garrison's theory — half hypothesis, half hallucination — was that Shaw had helped Oswald plot Kennedy's murder, with generous help from the Pentagon and the CIA. Garrison claimed that the federal government was suppressing the truth,

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and that democracy itself was beholden to the big brass of the military.

Stone lionizes Garrison's rhetoric and neglects the niggling reality. He conveniently fails to mention that Garrison's case had more holes in it than the motorcade at Dallas.

What was the basis for Garrison's prosecution? Three key witnesses had placed Shaw in Oswald's company, presumably to plot the murder. One witness was a pathological liar. The other witness was eccentric to say the least. And the third crucial witness was a former mental patient known for his flamboyant lapses of sanity. One of his rituals involved regularly taking his daughter's fingerprints to guarantee that she wasn't an impostor.

Garrison himself was not without mental delusions. One of his postulates, which goes unmentioned in "He Must Have Something," was that other JFK assassins hid in the storm drains of Elm Street and shot the president from below the asphalt. These sewers were only three feet high, which would have required the CIA to recruit midget hit men to carry off the job.

Considering the curious evidence, the jury took less than an hour before clearing Shaw. But the ordeal destroyed Shaw emotionally and financially. He died a broken man in 1974.

Tyler rightly faults Garrison for using McCarthyite tactics to try an innocent man for murder. If there is any justice, the Louisiana-made "He Must Have Something" will find a forum as large as Stone's prayerful piece of propaganda.

Using helter-skelter camera angles and a multimillion-dollar budget, Stone's "JFK" is an ambitious attempt to give his tabloid aesthetic the weight of Wagnerian opera. Tyler's "He Must Have Something" was made for a fraction of Stone's budget but is enormously richer in its insights.

Stone, like Garrison, is a man prone to brainstorming in public — throwing out one idea after another, hoping that if he says everything, he will eventually say something. What results is stuff like "JFK," a film that leans heavily on "Elvis-is-still-alive" mythology.

The antidote to Stone, the non-thinking man's thinking man, is "He Must Have Something." As it turns out, the *something* that Jim Garrison had was a total contempt for American justice.

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